DAVID BRACKETT

# POPULAR MUSIC

With a New Preface by the Author

# Interpreting Popular Music

# David Brackett

With a New Preface by the Author

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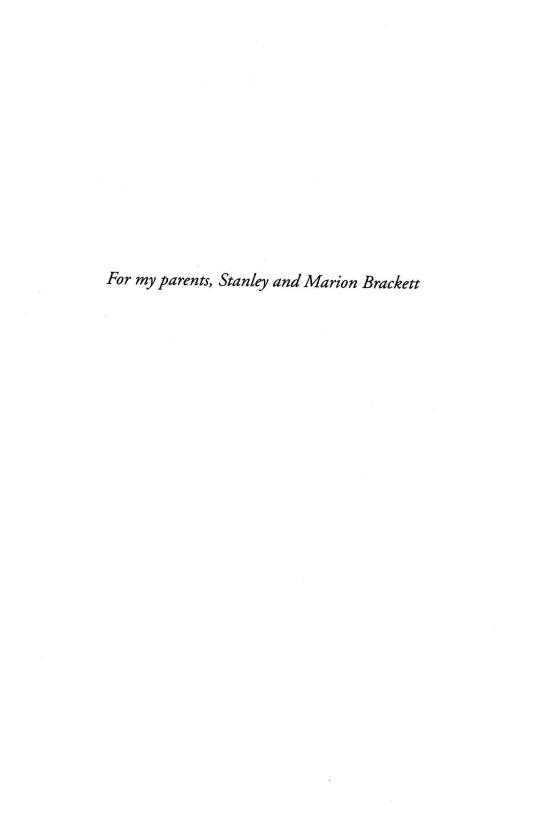
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# Preface

This project began as an attempt to find language that could explain my continuing fascination with popular music in the face of a notable lack of encouragement within academia to pursue that fascination. Not only did popular music have no place in the music curriculum, but the training I received seemed to make defending the viability of popular music an impossibility. Somehow, I knew that the popular music I enjoyed was in no way less interesting than the classical music that both I and my teachers loved; yet the methods I was learning to describe, praise, discuss, and write about music gave me no vocabulary to describe the "interesting" qualities of popular music in the way that I could describe the counterpoint of J. S. Bach, the intricate harmonic plan and dramatic form of Beethoven, or the delicate orchestral nuances of Debussy, Mahler, and Stravinsky. The harmonic plan of the popular music I enjoyed was usually quite simple, consisting often of only three or four chords. If it did contain modulations, these occurred within a simple and repetitious structure. In terms of "orchestration," these songs didn't fare much better, as their instrumentation often remained relatively static throughout.

One unforeseen consequence of this search for a style-specific analytical terminology was an increasing dissatisfaction with the idea of merely finding the language to discuss popular music in terms of its musical processes, as I came to recognize the strong link between the idea of discussing the "music itself" and the very repertoire already enshrined in academic study. In the end, this study leaned further and further away from the idea that the most important components in musical meaning could be found in internal musical relationships; instead, it sought to come to terms with the idea that musical meaning is socially constructed – even the type of musical meaning that seems to derive from internal musical relationships. Nevertheless, I did not wish to dismiss the importance of musical syntax entirely, for, as a musician, I remain convinced that the *sounds* of music – the way they are produced, the way they differ from one another, the way

they resemble each other, the relationship between specific gestures and their effects – are important. One of the great strengths of formal musical training is the ability to describe and analyze the sonic materials of music, and hence, this is the most obvious area where musicologists can contribute to the study of popular music. However, the tendency of the analytical techniques which I inherited to respond to certain sonic features while ignoring others challenged me to explore the idea of analytical pertinence, and thus, to emphasize how analytical metalanguage remains inextricable both from its socio-historical context and from any act of aesthetic evaluation.

In this book, I have tried to address students of music and those interested in the study of popular music who may not be trained musicians. Although any discussion of music in technical terms tends to create difficulties for those without specialized training in music, I have attempted to write the book in such a way that the main points will be clear to those from a variety of backgrounds. Issues are broached - such as the impact of race, gender, and class on musical interpretation, and the importance of history and genre to the social meaning of music - that I trust will be of interest to those outside the field of musicology. The stress here on ideas such as the musical code, and on music as a rhetorical practice, seeks to link the affective aspects of musical sounds with the perceptions of musical listeners who may not be musicians. At the same time, the emphasis on the socially and historically contingent nature of musical meaning and on the role of power relations in determining meaning shifts the emphasis away from that found in much other musicological work, although, as I mention in chapter one, the amount of work in musicology interested in these issues has increased considerably since I began this project in the late 1980s. I have chosen pieces of popular music from North America and Great Britain as my objects of study, primarily because of my interests and background, but also because I think that these particular songs raise interesting questions. While I do not propose an overarching method for the interpretation of popular music, the concern here with the way in which specific texts arise from (and contribute to) specific contexts to create different modalities of interpretation could, in principle, be applied to a broad range of musics, popular or otherwise.

With the changed perspective brought on by the reception of this book over the past five-plus years, it is increasingly clear that *Interpreting Popular Music* speaks to a particular moment in popular music studies when visions were rife of a synthesis between the sociological and musicological

branches of the field. During the four or so years I was completing the manuscript for this book, works appeared – such as Richard Middleton's Studying Popular Music (1990), John Shepherd's Music as Social Text (1991), Sheila Whiteley's The Space Between the Notes (1992), Allan Moore's Rock: The Primary Text (1993), and Robert Walser's Running with the Devil (1993) – that struggled with the particular problems posed by popular music to the activity of music analysis, as well as with the general epistemological framework of music analysis itself.

It is also clearer in retrospect that Interpreting Popular Music remains part of the ongoing reevaluation of the field of musicology. Particularly contested in this reevaluation, along with notions of the possibility of objective distance and the like in historiography, has been the activity of musical analysis. The main dividing line still lies between those interested in understanding the conditions that enable the practice of music analysis and those who take those conditions for granted, a division that in many ways reproduces the line between those who are and are not interested in the institutional and discursive conditions of the canon. These differences - which cut across the study of various forms of music, be they popular, non-Western, art music, or jazz - have occasioned acrimonious exchanges, largely based on disciplinary or sub-disciplinary affiliations, which have managed to obscure both the larger recurring issues and the way in which such exchanges frequently respond to exigencies of institutional and professional power. In light of this, the discussion in chapter one about the particular challenges faced by musicologists who wish to study popular music is offered more as an analysis of how a particular conjunction of power and knowledge tends to steer students toward one particular type of music and away from others rather than as a wholesale dismissal of musicology.

The idea of "interpretation" in this book has also occasioned some confusion; it does not, in this case, refer specifically to hermeneutic activity, although occasionally I do slide into uncontextualized phenomenology (especially in chapter five) that may mistakenly, if understandably, create the impression that one of the goals of the book was to reify the meaning of these recorded musical performances. Rather, *Interpreting Popular Music* aims to explore the conditions under which certain types of interpretation become possible, to take seriously statements or concepts, and to understand them both in the context of the events that preceded and followed them and in light of the historical formation of genres. In this case, the specific concepts that it aims to take seriously include the relationship between jazz and pop, the discourses of authenticity surrounding Hank

Williams, the idea of irreducible difference and James Brown, and the paradoxical anti-intellectualism of a pop music intellectual. The problems encountered may indeed stem from the occasional tenuousness of the difference between musical events and musical practices, from the difficulty of studying events/practices as forms of "meaningful" activity, and from trying to understand musical gesture as social practice, but the solution surely lies neither in the vagaries of neo-structuralist formalism (resulting from either conventional musical analysis or theories that oppose "musical experience" to the mediated, always social realm of the symbolic), nor in a more rigorous approach to semiotics.

Another issue that the reception of Interpreting Popular Music raised for me is that of the intellectual frame and authorial identity. As a reaction to the tendency of much work in cultural studies of the early nineties to deploy citations in order to accrue intellectual capital, I may have effectively obscured the intellectual framework for my own undertaking. This work is a kind of "history of the present," as Foucault describes it: an attempt to work from questions generated by current issues toward historical events with a particular focus on the conditions that enable the discourses in which the events are embedded. Another important aspect of the intellectual context for this book, in addition to the debates discussed earlier pertaining to musicology, was debates within popular music studies about the relative importance of sociology and musicology. The resolution to this debate remains a chimera, made more difficult by the fact that music seems to be the one area of cultural practice in which cultural studies scholars seem to be content not to refer to the specific characteristics of the medium they are studying. While many have been quick to dismiss musicological description for its supposed formalism, they have also not been able to acknowledge the advantages that may derive from an ability to describe the sonic details of popular music. Although Interpreting Popular Music addresses this issue in chapters one and six, the problem is clearer to me than it was then, as (non-musicologist) popular music scholars continue to call for a "theory of sound" without engaging with "theories of sound" that may already exist.

I also consciously avoided questions of the relationship of my personal experiences to the music I was writing about. This is most problematic, obviously, when I address issues such as the reception of popular music recorded by African Americans in chapters two and four. Skepticism about the importance of an author's intentions influenced to some degree why I did not include more autobiographical information about why I, a white, straight, bourgeois male, would choose the objects for study that I

did. Above all I wanted to avoid the self-justification that might trace my involvement with these artists and recordings to some originary, inspirational moment in my past, to anything that might smack of the "White Negro" or "Vanilla Ice" syndrome on the one hand, or of hand-wringing guilt on the other. Recognizing, as many have, that it requires a certain privilege to renounce the subject position of "author," I nonetheless felt that to dwell on questions of the relationship of my identity to the music I was writing about would shift the focus from the analytical issues to the elements of my biography. I dealt with this by trying both to diffuse any sense of mastery over the material and to avoid prescriptive formulations about what "black music" or "white music" is or is not, or how it should be studied. The main peril I see in white academics writing about "black music" is that they may be tempted to "speak for" black people, reproducing an odious historical power imbalance, or that they may ignore available evidence about what the music means and has meant to African Americans. No easy solution exists to this problem. Clearly, music scholarship on all subjects will benefit from hearing a greater variety of voices within its mix.

Although it is such an obvious point, I will risk stating it anyway: the relationship between music and identity is a complex, fascinating, and intensely personal one for musicians, fans, and scholars alike. Perhaps because of the intensity of this subject, chapter four (on James Brown) has elicited some surprising claims - to wit, that it argues for some sort of absolute difference between "black" and "white" musics. One reason I was reluctant to bring personal experiences into the book was my awareness of the fluid relationship between identity and musical style. That is, while various types of music may be historically associated with a certain group of people, that does not prevent people from outside that group from participating in it and enjoying it. Although I was not yet familiar with Paul Gilroy's theories advanced in The Black Atlantic (which appeared as I was completing the manuscript), the view espoused in chapter four on the relationship between identity and race is close to his idea of "anti-antiessentialism." In other words, while there is no essential, natural difference between people belonging to different racial groups, and while even the idea of racial difference is not natural but always fluid and shifting due to political exigencies, the idea of racial difference is a social fact that affects the practice of popular music. Members of historically dominated groups may even choose to use (in the words of Gayatri Spivak) "strategic essentialism" as a means of asserting control over self-representation. At the same time - as the ongoing and ever more rapid adoption by white youth

of African American and Latino style (in clothing, speech, and physical gestures, as well as music) indicates – we may use these categories as ways of making sense of the world, and as a way of referring to large, significant, and general differences, but as soon as "culture" becomes "mass culture" it becomes available to anyone. After all, the Average White Band made decent funk only a few years after "Superbad." But these observations may beg the question of appropriation, and of who benefits materially from that "culture": the Average White Band's "Pick Up the Pieces" still plays more often on rock radio stations in the United States than any of James Brown's recordings.

At any rate, I hope that chapters two and four might form a modest contribution to understanding the relationship between identity and music. In these chapters, as in the others, I was motivated by my desire to understand something about the effect of these musics on me and the many people with whom I had formed my intersubjective impressions of music over years of performing, discussing, and listening to it. Their value resides, I suspect, in how valuable or applicable these "understandings" are to readers.

Finally, I may write a thousand new prefaces, but I will not arrest the play of meaning in which these words participate, nor would I, despite appearances, choose to do so even if it were an option. Readers will continue to find what they want to here, and I am grateful to them for that.

Although I cannot thank everyone who influenced or helped make this book possible, a few specific acknowledgments must be made. Don Randel was the first to counter the "lack of encouragement" mentioned at the beginning of this preface by suggesting that a project such as this might be a viable one; and he continued to be a source of support in the years since that initial suggestion. Sarah Adams, Kofi Agawu, William W. Austin, Richard Crawford, Simon Frith, Martin Hatch, Marilyn Ivy, Anahid Kassabian, John Pemberton, Guthrie Ramsey, Penny Souster, Steven Stucky, and Peter Winkler all read sections of the book and/or discussed many of the concepts presented therein, and offered their suggestions, criticisms, and encouragement at vitally important moments. I am grateful to the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (IASPM), the national and international meetings of which provided a lively forum for the initial presentation of many of these ideas. Similarly, I would like to thank the Society for Ethnomusicology and the Society for American Music (formerly the Sonneck Society), at whose meetings I also delivered papers containing some of the ideas presented here. The students who attended

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# Introduction

### Prelude

In 1965, a recording by Gary Lewis and the Playboys, "This Diamond Ring," shot up the popularity charts shortly after its release, eventually reaching the number one position in February. At the end of 1965, Billboard magazine, the leading publication of the United States entertainment industry, ranked "This Diamond Ring" as the seventeenth most popular song of the year and ranked Gary Lewis the eighth most popular artist. Therefore, according to the measurements favored by the popular music industry, this was a very popular song, recorded by an artist who was very popular at the time. Exploring the phenomenon of "This Diamond Ring" – its significance and its popularity – will serve to introduce a number of issues critical to the interpretation of popular songs: the relationship of text to context, of musicians to audiences, of style to history, of artistry to commerce.

Surveying the pop styles represented in Billboard's "Top 100" (the most important chart for "pop" music as opposed to the "Rhythm and Blues" [R&B] and "Country" charts) in the first part of 1965 can give us some idea of the musical field against which to assess the meaning of the popularity of "This Diamond Ring." Featured in the top ten during February 1965, the month in which "This Diamond Ring" first achieved the number one position, were the "hard-rock" sounds of "British Invasion" groups such as the Beatles ("I Feel Fine") and the Kinks ("All Day and All of the Night"). The smooth soul sounds produced by the Motown record company figured prominently, with Marvin Gaye ("How Sweet It Is [To Be Loved by You]"), the Supremes ("Come See About Me"), and the Temptations ("My Girl") all represented. Other songs by R&B artists such as Shirley Ellis ("The Name Game") and Joe Tex ("Hold What You've Got") filled the upper reaches of the charts as did a song by the "blue-eyed soul" artists, the Righteous Brothers ("You've Lost That Lovin' Feeling"); also present was "Downtown" by Petula Clark, a

song with production values that were more closely tied to those formerly associated with Tin Pan Alley and Broadway musicals.

Of the songs mentioned in the preceding paragraph, "This Diamond Ring" resembled most closely in instrumentation and basic rhythmic approach the style of the British Invasion groups; yet aspects of the production of "This Diamond Ring" differed notably from all of the songs listed earlier. While the name "Gary Lewis and the Playboys" stood for a band, rather than for a solo singer like Petula Clark, Joe Tex, or Shirley Ellis, none of the members of the Playboys played on the recording, the instrumental portion of which was recorded entirely by studio musicians; and none of the members of the band were responsible for writing the song either. This by itself was not so unusual: of the artists listed above, only the Beatles and the Kinks were responsible for the instrumental tracks on their recordings, and only those two groups, along with Joe Tex and Shirley Ellis, wrote or co-wrote the songs they recorded. A strict division of labor was in effect for all the other recordings mentioned: the roles of singer, instrumentalist, and songwriter remained separate as they had from the inception of the popular music industry.

Put another way, there is no single "author" for these recordings. In popular songs, most listeners probably hear the lead vocalist as the source of a song's emotional content; it is the words and sounds associated with the most prominent voice in the recording that are heard to emit the signs of emotion most directly, to "speak" to the listener. It is thereby easiest to conflate the song's "persona" with at least the voice, and possibly the body, media image, and biography of the lead singer. For example, only a fraction of the audience would have been interested to know that David Ruffin, lead singer of the Temptations on "My Girl," did not write the song; but that Smokey Robinson and Ronald White, who did not perform on the recording at all, in fact wrote and produced (i.e., supervised the arrangement and the recording of) it. To the majority of the audience, it was David Ruffin (insofar as he was known as an individual outside of the Temptations) exulting about "his girl," not Smokey Robinson or Ronald White.

Yet, in this respect – that is, in the construction of an author for the pop music text that conflates some combination of singing voice, body, image, and biographical details – "This Diamond Ring" is somewhat of an anomaly. Listeners may notice a strange, almost otherworldly quality to the lead vocal which they may attribute to the presumed youth of the singer, his inexperience, or some innovative double-track recording

technique. However, a listener making these attributions would be only partially correct. John Morthland explains the curious genesis of this song:

Producer Snuff Garrett . . . signed Gary Lewis and the Playboys simply because he lived two doors down from Jerry Lewis in Bel Air and was intrigued by the idea of breaking a group fronted by the child of a celebrity. He moved Gary from drums to vocals, but the boy's voice made it onto "This Diamond Ring" only after it had been well reinforced by the overdubbed voice of one Ron Hicklin. Similarly, the Playboys didn't play on the song.

(Liner notes from Superhits 1965, Time-Life Music)

Truly, this is an example of a simulacrum that would warm Jean Baudrillard's heart: a song "recorded" by a group who doesn't play on it, who didn't write it, with a lead singer who is barely present on it.<sup>2</sup> One's head spins in search of the "original" in this instance of artistic production. Perhaps if we follow Roland Barthes and assert that the "Death of the Author" means that a "text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" leading to the "birth of the reader," then what matters in this case is whether any individual listener believed that the lead singer was Gary Lewis or Ron Hicklin.<sup>3</sup> Then again, the concept of "voice" and authorship in song, due to its performative nature, is a complex one, the discussion of which will have to be forestalled until later in this chapter.

Curiously enough, "This Diamond Ring" belongs to a pop music category that relies heavily on biographical details of the "artist" for its appeal. Steve Chapple and Reebee Garofalo termed this tributary of pop music "schlock-rock," a descendant of the "teenybop" music of the fifties and early sixties;4 and in its detachment of singing voice and author, "This Diamond Ring" anticipates "bubblegum" groups such as the Archies and the Banana Splits, the recorded voices of which do not correspond to biological humans at all but instead to cartoon characters (and it also anticipates such notorious recent "fakers" as Milli Vanilli). The scene and persona described and projected by the lyrics of "This Diamond Ring" typify those of teenybop music: the image of the teenybop idol "is based on self-pity, vulnerability, and need"; he is "sad, thoughtful, pretty, and puppylike"; in the lyrics, teenybop male protagonists are "soft, romantic, easily hurt, loyal," while women emerge as "unreliable, fickle, [and] more selfish than men." Teenage magazines directed towards a female readership feature male pop stars, but make little mention of the music; instead they dwell on the star's personality, his "looks and likes."5

Since a tight link between the biographical details of the biological author and the actual performer heard on the recording cannot account for the appeal of "This Diamond Ring" and its resultant success, we must look elsewhere. Perhaps, as described in the preceding paragraph, it was the ability of Gary Lewis and the Playboys to fit so smoothly into the teenybop category in image and recorded material that won them their success, notwithstanding the fact that Gary Lewis' "looks and likes" did not correspond to those of the lead singer heard on "This Diamond Ring." Or perhaps elements of its musical style distinguished "This Diamond Ring" from its competitors? Musically, "This Diamond Ring" both resembles and differs from its "competition" in several respects. The song features basic "combo" instrumentation heard on many recordings of the era (electric guitar, organ, bass, drums), modal (dorian) inflections in the harmony and melody of the verse, and a basic rock beat pattern; in the chorus it features functional harmony, "closed" phrase structure (a type of phrasing associated with functional harmony and "rhyming" periodic structure), a minimum either of instrumental riffing ("open" phrase structure) or of melodic variation on the part of the lead singer, and little of the rhythmic play found in contemporaneous R&B or rock songs. Instrumentally, the verse features timpani, an instrument rarely found in R&B or rock songs, while the arrangement uses other "novelty" percussion instruments throughout the piece.<sup>6</sup> The transition between verse and chorus contains a modulation of a kind - C minor (dorian) to G-flat major – that is harmonically daring and rare in the popular music of the period.

"This Diamond Ring" also contains several specific references to contemporaneous popular tunes. The harmonic progression of the chorus resembles that found in many Lennon-McCartney songs: the descending bass (G-flat/F/E-flat/D-flat) is reminiscent of "Bad to Me," while the vi-iii (E-flat minor to B-flat minor) movement is found in many of the most popular Beatles songs ("Please Please Me," "I Want to Hold Your Hand," "She Loves You," "And I Love Her," to name a few). The melodic turn on "true" ("if you find someone whose heart is true") also resembles similar turns in many Beatles songs (e.g., "Please Please Me" - "Last night I said these words to my girl"; "Do You Want to Know a Secret" - "nobody knows, just we two") and in many other popular songs from the period. In other words, the musical style of "This Diamond Ring" skims aspects from contemporary rock songs, cobbles a "hook" together out of other hooks from successful songs, and is then produced and arranged from the aesthetic vantage point of "easylistening" music.